Sample Paper

This paper was written by one of my students and provides a general idea of what I am looking for in your paper for this class. This is not a perfect paper, but it reflects the type of writing, thinking, and format that I expect from students. Note that the paper consists of three parts: a summary of a psychology related article, a critical analysis of the article, and the article itself. Note also the general length of the student’s paper and of the article the student chose to write about.

"For They Know Not What They Do?"

Summary

In the article, "For They Know Not What They Do?" Harriet Barovick, Cathy Booth, and Sylvester Monroe make a collaborative effort to investigate the darker side of childhood innocence. What sort of devious actions are children capable of, and can children be held fully accountable for those actions? The TIME article focuses on crimes much more obscene and horrifying than stealing a cookie from the cookie jar or lying about the broken vase. It cites several cases of murder in which the culprit is a person who would never be thought capable of such an evil: a child. In the nine cases mentioned, no murderer was over the age of thirteen, in fact, "20 or so U.S. kids under 10...are arrested for committing homicide each year..." Are these children simply not like the rest? Or are these "twenty-or-so" acting out impulses that are present to some degree in every child?

Carl Bell, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Illinois, argues that the actions of these few may not be so abnormal. "Seven-year-olds for the most part have little or no understanding of other higher-order concepts necessary to turn right and wrong into Right and Wrong—most significantly, death and remorse." Children know that killing someone is wrong, but to not comprehend the finer points of why. But what Bell suggests focuses on some children's inaptitude to control themselves rather than the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. He says, "This could have been some real innocent stuff. Kids throw rocks all the time [and] could have been in a youthful predatory mode..." Others, however, mostly throw their support behind theories revolving around the child's inability to comprehend morality.
Most psychologists agree that children are able to understand very basic ethical reasoning well before they reach their teenage years, but that this understanding is not well developed for kids under ten. Kyle Pruett, a professor of clinical psychology at the Yale Child Study Center, conducted a test to prove this point. He told the children that one child broke a teacup while throwing it at his sister, and another child broke eight of them while helping with the dishes. When asked which child had done the worse thing, the average seven-year-old will choose the second child because more teacups were broken. "By 11, they have it sorted out that intentionality is part of the moral system. Not when you're seven."

Another leading factor in the moral naivete of kids is their egocentricity. They can be told that a certain consequence is definitely attached to a certain action, but they do not actually think it will happen. They do not feel guilty about things like an adult does. "Kids' egocentrism helps explain why they can do something they know to be wrong, immediately try to cover it up, but then fairly quickly get back to the business of being children." In the case of child murderers, many are documented to have resumed their normal activities just minutes after committing the crime. In 1989, Cameron Kocher, then nine, shot seven-year-old Jessica Carr over a Nintendo dispute, hid the evidence, and immediately went back to playing the game. Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, after savagely murdering two-year-old James Bulger in 1993, ambled down to a video store and watched some television. These children simply did not foresee a consequence, and therefore were not panicked or worried in the immediate aftermath of their destructive behavior. So what can society do with kids that commit such gruesome deeds?

"The important thing is not to trash these kids," says Bell. As a society, we still need to recognize their need for attachment and support. Is it appropriate to subject child criminals to years of juvenile detention? Alan Kazdin, chairman of Yale's psychology department, believes that this sort of punishment is ineffective. It is not designed to teach children what to do, and only in some cases does it teach what not to do. Additionally, young children often do not even understand they are being punished. Even in jail, they expect things to continue like normal. Basically, children are often very removed from the situation. During his trial, a six-year-old boy from Richmond, California spent most of the time drawing and sleeping while lawyers debated his innocence. The boy, whose name was not mentioned in the article, was accused of sneaking into a neighbor's home and repeatedly kicking an infant in the head, causing four fractures and
effectively crippling the baby for life. Children this age are simply unable to comprehend the legal system, their rights, or their sentences. Because of this, the New York Supreme Court made it much more difficult to question very young suspects with laws passed in 1986. However, most states have actually made it easier to try and convict children as adults. So the question remains: can (or rather, should) young children be held fully accountable for their actions?

Analysis

I think this article reflects a growing trend in today's society. More and more often, stories of school shootings, youth involvement in gangs, and child killers are brought to national attention. The title of the article is my main point of interest: "For They Know Not What They Do?" Do these media stories show us the result of a few bad eggs? Or are these destructive impulses a common factor in all children as they develop?

Prior to reading this article, I had been captivated by the case of the murder of James Bulger in 1993. As previously mentioned, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson abducted little James and brutally murdered him. This was quite possibly one of the most horrific and widely publicized child killer cases of the century. After dragging him through the streets of Liverpool, periodically beating him, Thompson and Venables arrived at a discrete location by the railway. According to experts' reconstruction of events, the two spattered the toddler with paint, beat him over the head with an iron bar, pummeled him with bricks and stones, possibly molested him, and laid his limp body across the tracks. What could possibly compel a child to commit such an atrocity? It is easy to make an internal dispositional assumption about the boys and blame the crime on their abnormal tendency toward delinquency. But I think that many children under the same circumstances might act in the same manner. Perhaps most children have an innate predisposition to join Jack on "Castle Rock". It has been speculated that the two boys "egged each other on", increasing the degree of violence until the eventual killing of James. The normative influence two children may have on each other can explain an incremental increase in aggression, leading to actions that one child normally would not take alone. But what of the children acting alone? The mere fact that some of the children committing these crimes do not have an accomplice proves that a third party is not always needed to instigate the situation or "egg on" the child. Then again, children that act alone may be exceptions to the rule. Perhaps they are the true
abnormal children compared to those who act in groups.

Case in point: my younger brother,_________. He has never killed another person (that we know of), but he has exhibited very sociopathic behaviors. From birth, everyone knew that he was going to be a handful. This, however, was a complete understatement. _________ was always the instigator, always the bully. The only reason for interacting with other people was self-benefit. And whenever he was in trouble, he knew exactly how to become the victim and manipulate the situation. My brother was certainly not conditioned to act this way by my mother, or any other role model for that matter. His peers are also innocent of influencing his behavior because of __________’s anti-social tendencies. He was just born this way. By the time he was thirteen years old, he had been diagnosed with a host of mental disorders including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and Tourette's syndrome. _________ is only one of millions of children with behavioral disorders in the United States. As we can see, nature can definitely overpower nurture in the development of children. So does that explain why the Kochers of the world are the way they are?

We simply do not know. Psychologists may have a few methods to study childhood murderers, but they can never conduct a proper experiment to support their arguments. Speculation and correlation are the only mediums of exploration into this subject. But I do not believe the question of "why" is as important as, "Now what?"

How do we handle the children convicted of such adult crimes? I agree with Professor Bell in that we cannot simply discard these kids' lives. We already know that our youngest killers need psychiatric help. But on top of that, the trauma of the incident often further debilitates the child. We must realize that most of these children are also the victim of their own crime. They need care, support, and a healthy living environment. They need a second chance. These children eventually grow out of their moral limbo and will develop, for better or worse, into adulthood.

It is indisputable that the actions of these few are disdainfully immoral, and the results are painful. "But is to do evil necessarily to know it, to consciously call it forth?" In the case of morally immature children, I say no, for they know not what they do.
For They Know Not What They Do?

By John Cloud

When I was about seven, I stole a box of green Tic-Tacs from the grocery store. I was a stupid little thief: my mom heard them ticking and tacking in my pocket as I helped carry the Cheerios inside. She promptly drove me back to the store, where I had to present the candies and an apology to the manager. Later, my father shared some words of wisdom (which I don't recall) and some hard licks from the Big Black Belt (which I do).

Did I know right from wrong? Had I reached some "age of reason"? I don't know. As the child of Southern parents, I did know my dad would whup my butt if I stole, but I'm not sure I grasped the finer points of private property, ownership, capitalism, whatnot. I just wanted the Tic-Tacs and thought I could get away with them.

In the 1890s, it was just such crimes—petty theft, truancy—that led the city of Chicago to create the nation's first courts for kids. It was a wildly progressive idea for a time when many children still worked long hours. True, more than a bit of bigotry fueled the reform—it was thought that the good people running the juvie courts could rehabilitate the immigrant urchins. But the children themselves were still seen as children, incapable of real culpability because they couldn't reason right from wrong.

A century later, a juvenile-court system devised in a more peaceful era must cope with atrocities altogether more vicious. The city of Chicago shuddered last week not just at its new horror but at the not so faded memories of murdered five-year-olds, one tossed from a window by a 10-year-old boy and his 10-year-old friend in 1994, the other beaten to death five months ago, allegedly by two other children, one of them nine. These are crimes that horrify and bewilder, crimes that tempt us to think that if kids are capable of such evil, they must be punished without mercy.

But is doing evil necessarily to know it, to consciously call it forth? As the little boys who allegedly molested and murdered Ryan Harris begin a long and harrowing journey through the judicial system, their legal fate will preoccupy armies of lawyers and reporters. But it's worth taking note of their moral fate too: when babies kill babies, do they understand the meaning of their actions? And what do we do with them now?

On Feb. 12, 1993, after they threw more than 20 bricks at two-year-old James Bulger's head and after they kicked him, tore off his lower lip, stripped him and possibly molested him, 10-year-old pals Robert Thompson and Jon Venables left the raggedy corpse on train tracks in Liverpool. Like many an English lad, Thompson knew the train times by heart, according to the New Yorker, and he might have thought the murder would appear accidental.

A continent but perhaps not a world away, in Richmond, Calif., two years ago, a six-year-old boy—six!—sneaked into a neighbor's home apparently looking to steal a tricycle. A month-old infant named Ignacio Bermudez Jr. began crying. The six-year-old is accused of taking the baby from his bassinet, putting him on the floor and kicking his head. Ignacio's skull was fractured in four
places; he will probably never walk.

What Thompson, Venables and the never identified six-year-old have in common is not just their youthful violence. All of them seemed to understand, at least formally, that what they were doing was wrong. That's what the placement of Bulger's body on the tracks suggests; and the prosecutor of the six-year-old says three doctors concluded that the boy was able to discern right from wrong in the abstract. Similarly, in 1989, after nine-year-old Cameron Kocher shot Jessica Carr, age 7, with a rifle after an argument over Nintendo in their hometown in northeast Pennsylvania, the boy hid the spent cartridge. And after Robert ("Yummy") Sandifer, 11, killed a 14-year-old girl in Chicago in the late summer of 1994, he spent days eluding police before fellow gang members executed him.

Kids know it's wrong to Mil. They know it's right to put their toys away. Yes, they know even at seven, unless they have a disability. Seven has traditionally been considered the age of reason, a rough turning point in moral development. For more than a century, English common law has held that children under seven cannot commit crimes (but that those over seven can). "There used to be an old expression, 'Give me a child till he's seven, and I'll give you the adult,'" recalls Brian McSweeney, a vice chancellor of the Archdiocese of New York. There's more than a grain of truth in that maxim.

But while most psychologists agree that young children can grasp very basic concepts of right and wrong well before adolescence (when they seem to ignore right and wrong), most also say those concepts aren't well developed for kids under 10. Kyle Pruett, a professor of clinical psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center, illustrates this point with a test: "Tell a seven- or eight-year-old, Johnny broke one teacup throwing it at his sister. Sara broke eight teacups helping Dad load the dishwasher. Which kid did the worse thing?" The average seven-year-old will pick Sara because she broke more. By 11, they have it sorted out that intentionality is part of the moral system. Not when you're seven."

Seven-year-olds for the most part have little or no understanding of other higher-order concepts necessary to turn right and wrong into Right and Wrong—most significantly, death and remorse. "They know people die, but they don't know what it means," says Carl Bell, a University of Illinois psychiatry professor who has worked with troubled urban kids for two decades. "I've talked to seven-year-old kids who think when you're dead, you're just hanging out somewhere." And Paul Mones, a Portland, Ore., lawyer and a leading expert on young murderers, says, "Kids are naturally egocentric. Kids can be told they will go to hell, but they don't really think they'll go to hell. When lads lie about stealing a cookie, they don't feel bad like an adult."

Kids' egocentrism helps explain why they can do something they know to be wrong, immediately try to cover it up, but then fairly quickly get back to the business of being children. Hence after they left Bulger on the tracks, Venables and Thompson went into a video store near Thompson's house and
watched cartoons on the telly. As Carr's mother tried frantically and futilely to save her daughter, Kocher went back to playing Nintendo ("If you don't think about it, you won't be sad," he reportedly told other kids, who were crying). And in Chicago last week, the seven- and eight-year-old boys suspected of killing Harris went home afterward to play with a dog and watch TV.

Bell reasons that what those boys are alleged to have done may not necessarily be so abnormal. "This could have been some real innocent stuff. Kids throw rocks all the time. But the other issue is these kids could have been in a youthful predatory mode; kids who have been preyed upon before, victimized before, sometimes act that behavior out," he says. Of their apparent sexual assault on Harris, he says, "Kids at the age of seven and eight are forever doing little kinky, polymorphously perverse things—voyeurism, exhibitionism, cross dressing, anal and oral experimentation."

That maybe going a little far—playing doctor is not the same as playing with a corpse. But Bell's thinking suggests that what young killers lack is not so much a sense of right and wrong as something much more fundamental—a sense of self-control. "Kids endlessly have—and often play-act—fantasies of being great warriors," says Ted Becker of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. "But most kids don't have this inability to control themselves in the real world." The 20 or so U.S. kids under 10 who are arrested for committing homicide each year are abnormal, in other words, but they're abnormal in a much more childish way than we admit when we pretend they had criminal intent and charge them with murder.

So if these little angels are just angels who happen to lose control of bricks, rocks and high-powered rifles too often, how do we teach them self-control? Last week Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, now 14 and 12, were found "delinquent" for blasting away at fellow students outside their Jonesboro, Ark., school in March, killing five and wounding 10. They got the maximum punishment possible for kids their age: they will be confined by state juvenile authorities until they turn 21. But it's worse than it sounds: Johnson's father was horrified at the thought that his boy would be sent to the Alexander juvenile facility, a place where abuse and molestation are said to be rampant.

It's hard to determine the reasons—other than revenge—for sentencing Mitchell and Drew to several years of this. "Punishment won't do anything," says Alan Kazdin, chairman of Yale's psychology department. "Punishment never teaches what to do, [and only] sometimes what not to do." Some very young kids don't even understand they're being punished. "Even in jail, kids want their candy bars, their pillows and pajamas," says lawyer Mones. They wonder where their cheeseburgers are." It's also crucial to realize these kids will get out someday. The important thing to do is not to trash these kids," says Carl Bell, "with disregard for their need for attachment, school, mental health evaluation and support."

Last week Chicago officials struggled over how to handle the seven- and eight-year-olds in court. Would they have any idea what's going on? Not really. John Burris is the Oakland lawyer who defended the six-year-old accused of kicking Ignacio Bermudez Jr. "The prosecution in this case
took the position that he was going to make the six-year-old responsible," Burris says. "But while the prosecutor was ranting and raving, this kid was drawing, sitting on his mother's lap, sleeping. He referred to me as the 'tall man.' He didn't understand what I did."

Similarly, no matter how many cop shows they watch, seven-year-olds can't understand Miranda rights. In an important case in 1986, the New York supreme court issued a ruling that made it more difficult, at least in that state, to question very young children suspected of crimes. Three years earlier, a seven-year-old Queens boy named Julian B. had allegedly pushed two-year-old Reggie Clegg from the roof of an apartment building. Under questioning, Julian admitted that he had shoved Reggie from the roof after an argument over a toy car. But the court found that the police hadn't made a necessary "extra effort" to explain to a seven-year-old what his rights were. Still, even if they had illustrated with a Barney doll and all four Teletubbies, he probably would not have understood. That's what being a child means.

In the past five years, most states have made it easier to charge and punish children as adults. Thirteen-year-olds are therefore getting mandatory life-without-parole sentences, and there's nothing appellate courts can do to help them. We have effectively discarded these lives. Should we make n-year-olds eligible for life behind bars? Nine-year-olds? Seven-year-olds? We are inching closer and closer to a moral line.

—Reported by Harriet Barovick/ New York, Cathy Booth/Los Angeles and Sylvester Monroe/Atlanta

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